



The Benson Murder Case S.S. Van Dine

The Benson Murder Case – A Philo Vance Story is the first of a series of twelve popular mysteries set in New York during the Jazz Age. S. S. Van Dine is the nom de plume of prominent art critic, and member of New York’s avant-garde, W. H. Wright. He rapidly became one of the country’s best-selling authors and the series remained immensely popular for decades, as Philo Vance was featured in dozens of movies, plays and radio shows. Van Dine’s novels marked a sharp departure from earlier detective fiction. To begin with, the hero represents the antithesis of the familiar hard-boiled detective. He is an eccentric and volatile loner; a highly erudite aesthete; a debonair bon vivant; a fop. Indeed, Van Dine even flirts with his hero’s sexuality where, for instance, a friend tells Vance: “I trust you won’t wear your green carnation,” – then the symbol of homosexuality. Moreover, Philo Vance approaches crime from a totally new standpoint, more or less ignoring the sorts of evidence and inference generally used to solve mysteries. His perspective is primarily psychological. Thus, he tells his friend Van: “The truth can be learned only by an analysis of the psychological factors of a crime, and an application of them to the individual. The only real clues are psychological—not material.” (The author casts himself in the role of the narrator, “Van,” Vance’s old college friend, now his lawyer, advisor and general agent.)

Within minutes of viewing the scene of the crime, Vance throws out veiled hints and innuendos that he knows who murdered Alvin Benson. D. A. John Markham good-humoredly ignores these intimations and soon finds there is enough evidence to make an arrest, when Vance convinces him that his suspect could not possibly be guilty. After developing a strong evidential case against someone else, Vance proves that this second suspect, too, must be innocent. And so, it goes with several more suspects. In the end Vance identifies, and explains how his reasoning immediately pointed to, the actual murderer. (Summary by Kirsten Wever)

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